

# Franklin's conflicted nonconformity: the effects of social prejudice



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Benjamin Franklin, America's proud representative of a self-made man, was truly of a character considered a genius and ahead of his time. His autobiography consists of an array of themes that influence and highlight American culture and identity. While Franklin is most noted for being an individualist, as well as a man of esteemed values and remarkable discipline, Franklin's autobiography showcases other aspects of his personality, which he describes in accordance to his life story. These aspects make up the various themes in *The Autobiography*: religion, industriousness, and self-improvement are only to name a few. One of the themes in *The Autobiography* is social prejudice, where social norms and expectations affect Franklin's life one way or another. It is discerned in the way the society of his time reacted or behaved towards Franklin for different reasons.

One of the earliest evidence of social prejudice stated in *The Autobiography* is when Franklin was sixteen and had decided to start a "Vegetable Diet". This, however, "occasioned an Inconveniency" and he was "frequently chid" for this "singularity". At the time vegetarianism was not so common, and people around him clearly did not welcome this "singularity", as it is normal for a community to disapprove of a member of their lot to have some unusual thing about them.

The next part of his life which resulted in more severe criticism from society was when he "had already made [him]self a little obnoxious to the governing Party" due to having written and published pieces in the newspaper on political topics and subsequently offending the Assembly, which therefore made him disliked by the rich and high-standing people in town. Furthermore, Franklin was not a practicing Christian and from

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indulging in his books had grown to doubt the teachings of the church. He was however not afraid to be truthful about his opinions and was thus “ indiscreet” on his “ disputations about religion”. This caused him to be “ pointed at with Horror by good People, as an Infidel or Atheist”. Naturally most of society condemned him for his differing outlook on religion, and so Franklin was viewed in a negative light.

Although Franklin appears to have had very little care for what others thought of him, he in fact demonstrates his understanding of the importance of how other people perceived him. This was especially so once he established his own Printing-House, for he made a big deal at securing his “ Credit and Character as a Tradesman”. He “ took care not only to be in Reality Industrious and frugal, but to avoid all Appearances of the contrary.” In other words, Franklin knew the significance of appearing well-mannered, amiable and educated. He would dress plainly, ensure not to be seen at “ Places of Idle Diversion” and never went out fishing or shooting. Moreover, Franklin would ensure that people witnessed him bring home the paper he bought from stores for the sake of proving that he was not haughty from his business. This all emphasizes his willingness to do things for the sake of profit, for his endeavors certainly resulted in a better business for him. And while the community was happy to accept Franklin for all the appearances he put up, it treated Franklin's temporary rival, David Harry, differently. It was because Harry was “ very proud, dressed like a gentleman, and lived expensively”, thus leaving him bankrupt as a result. From this, people were less genial towards Harry, but were definitely so towards Franklin, proving

not only the impact with which being liked by society could have on an individual, but also the social expectations that existed at the time.

One final example which underscores social prejudice as a theme in this piece, is when Franklin was set up with a friend's relation for marriage, but was rejected due to his career. Franklin states that with his career he was not so desirable a match, as his business was considered "not a profitable one". The fact that owners of previous printing-houses had failed in their businesses made Franklin one expected to fail as well. With this point of view by the society, Franklin had a difficult time finding a wife.

Benjamin Franklin became successful and emerged as a father-figure of America regardless of social prejudice. He was misunderstood, however, as a result of thinking differently than the norm, but he did not allow the "pointed fingers" and assumptions of others to affect him in achieving success. As Ralph Waldo Emerson states in his work entitled, *Self-Reliance*, "To be great is to be misunderstood"; and Franklin proves to be a great example of this belief.